

FIRST IN - WEASELS OVER SYRIA

1st July, 2013

It's 23:00 and I'm currently sitting at Incirlik airbase. When Rotor and I left H4 earlier today for our sortie we did not expect to end up here.

Our mission to escort a British Tornado on a recon flight south through Sierra came apart really quickly when the Brit aircraft took an unlucky hit from dense Syrian AAA fire. We know that at least one of the aircrew bailed out, but their current status is unknown...at least to me and Rotor.

As the rescue mission began the Syrian's started to respond, launching a large number of aircraft which blocked our route home. Thus we were routed up to Incirlik, into which we were guided by a USMC Hornet pilot. Once safely back on the ground, the Marine met us on the ramp and got us to where we needed to be, his name was Poodle...an interesting callsign, but unfortunately we never got a chance to ask him about it before he had to rush away to tend to other duties. Our aircraft were left in the capable hands of the ground crews of the 179th FS - the F-16 ANG unit that has recently arrived at Incirlik.

Before leaving us, Poodle guided us to a debrief where we handed over our tapes and went through what happened on the mission. From here we were herded straight into a large theater style briefing room, where approximately 50 personnel were present. It was clear to us that whatever was about to happen we were going to be a part of it. We knew that this was going to be a highly important mission, but if there was any question, then the presence of Major General Forster - otherwise known as 'Guardian' the Joint Forces Air Component Commander of the JSTF - would have quickly dispelled any doubts.

As the room settled down, Forster stepped to the podium at the front of the briefing room, and in his distinctive raspy voice began the briefing.

"Good evening" he said, as he began to address the room, eyeing us all with a steely gaze. "By now it will not be news to any of you that we have an aircraft down south of no fly Sierra. The Syrian's know this as well as you do".

You could have heard a pin drop as Forster spoke.

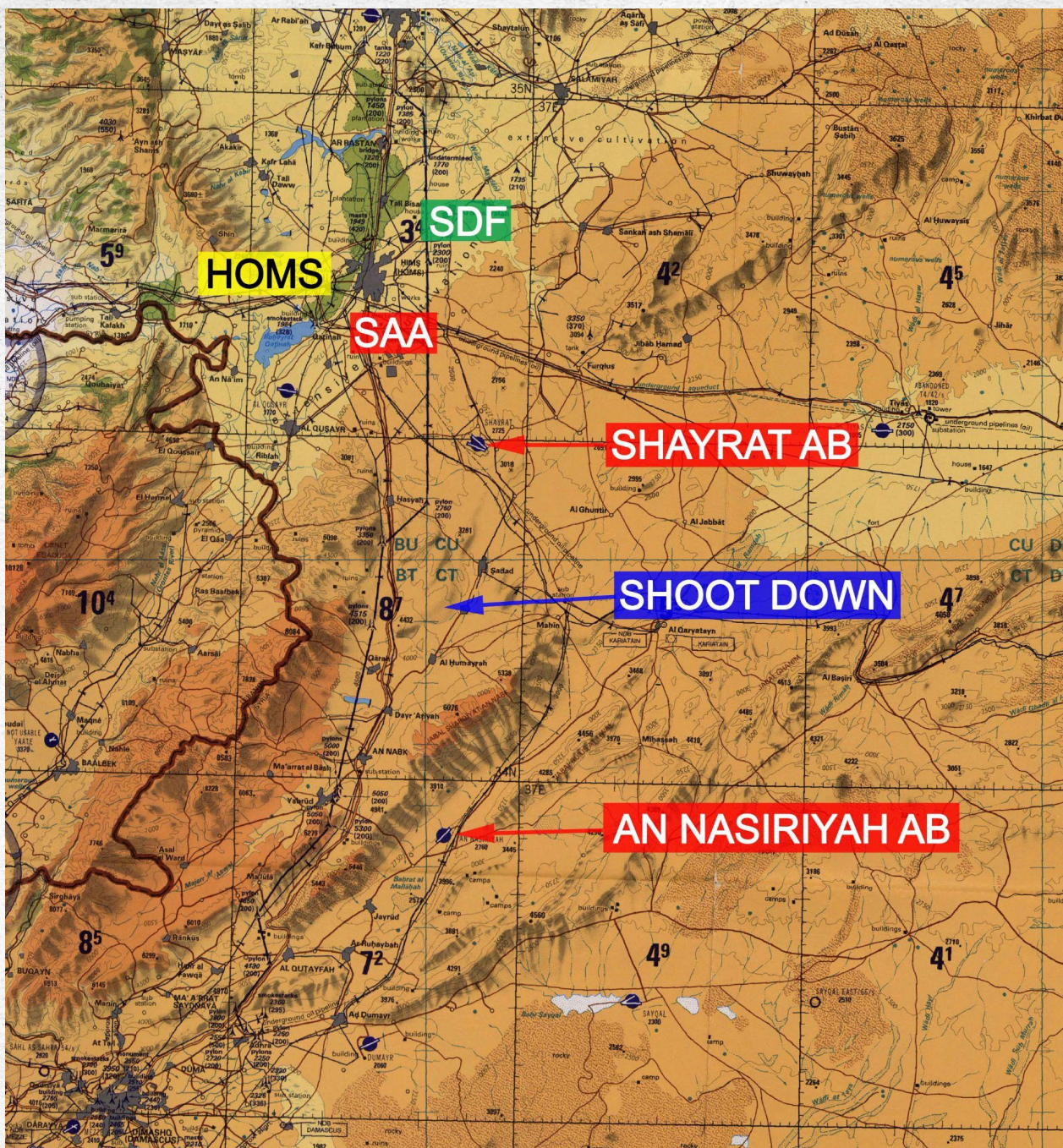
"The pilot, from the Royal Air Force is alive and is currently undertaking evasive measures to avoid capture as we speak. He is in a dangerous place. Thankfully he is not seriously injured...but he is cold, he is tired and he is alone. And we're going to go get him. Any one of us would do this for any of you, we don't leave people behind...so let's get this done. Colonel Rawls".

Forster stepped aside and a squat, formidable looking USAF Colonel replaced him at the podium. The Colonel brought a slide up onto the large cinema style screen at the front of the room.

"This evening, at approximately 18:00 local, a British GR-4 Tornado was hit by what we believe to be guided AAA fire from a Syrian KS-19 battery. The aircraft came down around 30 miles south of Homs".

"The pilot is alive and managed to establish contact with aircraft overhead. The status of the second crewmember is currently unknown, but the flight's number two aircraft reported only seeing one chute".

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“The pilot went down in hostile territory, within an SAA controlled area and sandwiched between both Shayrat and An Nasiriyah air bases. We had numerous supporting aircraft overhead within 15 minutes of the shootdown, these aircraft established contact with the pilot and provided cover for him as he broke contact and escaped from immediate Syrian attention. This included the engagement of an armored column that was traversing the MSR to Homs. However the Syrian air defenses soon regrouped and as additional SAMs were brought online our aircraft were forced to depart to the north”.

“Our last transmission from the pilot is that he has so far successfully evaded the Syrian patrols looking for him and is using the cover of darkness to move north to an extraction point. This extraction will be somewhere east of Shayrat airbase”.

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"This will not be easy. Although the Syrian IADS in this area has been seriously degraded there are still a number of significant threats, especially to helicopters. This area has a substantial number of AAA batteries of all calibers, further to this the Syrians have been deploying SA-8s and Dogear mobile radars to attempt to plug gaps in their air defense. Finally the Syrians appear determined to find our pilot and are bringing additional ground units into the area, these units are likely moving with mobile SHORAD systems and potentially mobile SAMs as well...so we can expect anything from SA-8s up to SA-6 or possibly SA-11 as well".

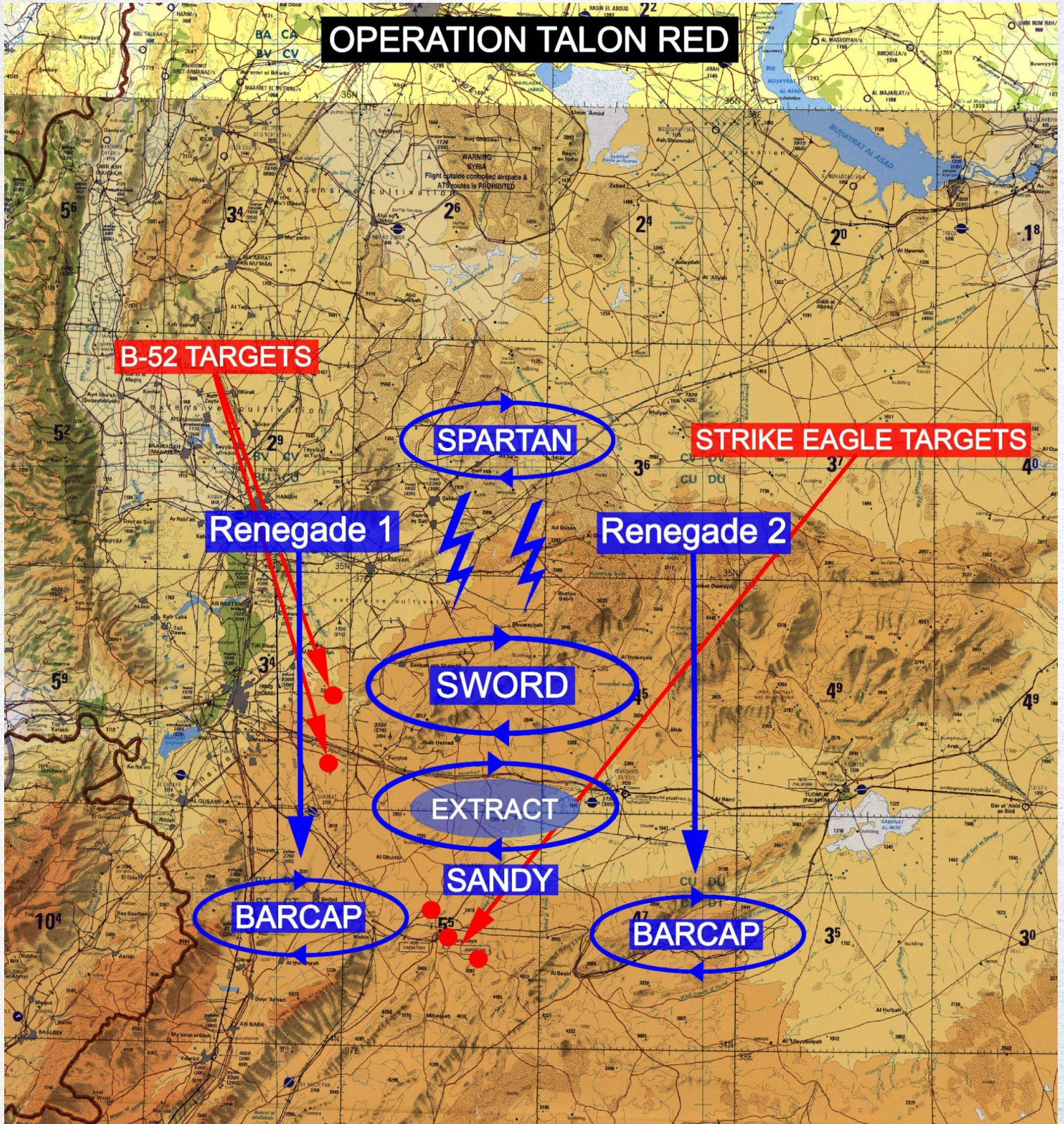
The Colonel switched slides to show us the expected area, flanked by both Shayrat and Tiyas airbases.



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“Given the threat, this will be a complex, large force operation. We will push south into Sierra in strength, sanitize the airspace, neutralize any SAM threats, beat back any interfering ground forces and then extract our man. We are calling this Operation Talon Red”.

Switching slides again, Colonel Rawls brought a new map up on the briefing screen”.



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"To begin, 2 flights of F-15Cs, Renegade 1 and 2 will conduct a fighter sweep of their AORs, before setting up a BARCAP above the Syrian airbases in the area. If anything attempts to get airborne while we are overhead, Renegade will be ready to pounce".

"Accompanying Renegade will be our SEAD element, provided by Sword flight's Wild Weasels from the 79th FS. Supporting this initial phase there will also be 2 flights of E/A-18 Growlers, callsign Spartan. Renegade, Sword and Spartan will remain on station for the duration of the operation".

"Once the airspace has been secured, we will bring in our second wave and a Sandy flight of two A-10s will proceed to the pilot's expected location. The downed pilot will be going by their flight callsign of Action 2. Sandy will set up a CAS wheel overhead and provide CAS as required. As this is happening two B-52s, callsigns Fear 1-1 and Fear 1-2 will suppress the SAA at the 312th and 171st Brigade garrisons, located nearby to the northwest of the extraction area. A flight of Strike Eagles, callsign Hammer 1 will engage SAA positions further south. All three positions contain artillery that can threaten the extraction site, we need to prevent this possibility".

"Finally, with the ground forces suppressed, we will bring in a pair of HH-60s - callsign Archangel, for the extraction, escorted by 2 Apaches. Once Action 2 is safely secured, the helo force will egress north with Sandy, followed by Renegade, Sword and Spartan".

"Sentinel will be providing C2 during the operation, we will also have Vacuum airborne for real time monitoring of threat emitters and our E-3s will be the Eagle's eyes in the sky. All mission elements will be operating on a common mission frequency, more information will follow in your individual briefings, which will cover the role of each mission element in more detail. But before we dismiss you, Major Daniels here will deliver an updated intelligence brief. Major..."

Rawls gestured for Major Daniels to take to the podium.

Taking the podium Daniels discussed the Syrian activity we had monitored over the last 5 hours. The Syrians seem determined to capture our pilot. Whether this is for the exploitation of intelligence, propaganda purposes or to damage our morale is unclear. But what is clear is that this is the most active we've seen the Syrian air force since Cerberus North began, with at least 3 squadrons of Syrian fighters being involved in an aggressive posture towards our aircraft. This stance has lessened somewhat since darkness fell however, with the SyAAF not appearing willing to risk an engagement at night.

On the ground, Syrian forces from the 312th Mechanized Infantry brigade and 171st Infantry Brigade have joined the hunt, deploying patrols across the area. Additional forces from the south are also moving north to support the Syrian operation, it is these forces that appear to be moving with mobile air defenses.

In summary, Daniel's assessment was that the Syrians are throwing everything at achieving their objective, and whether in the air or on the ground, we should be prepared for a fight to achieve ours.

With the mass briefing over, the assembled crowd dispersed and Rotor and myself found ourselves in a smaller briefing room, here we were conferenced in to Popeye and the rest of our Weasel detachment back at H4, and we went through our mission in more detail.

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Popeye had a weather briefing prepared for us. During the evening the winds have begun to pick up, which has had the benefit of helping clear the majority of the clouds out. Conditions through the night and into tomorrow morning look like scattered clouds around 8,000 feet, with moderately strong winds of around 10 knots.

Operation Talon Red will take place under cover of darkness. Rotor and I will depart Incirlik at 00:45 Zulu / 03:45 local tomorrow morning. The procedures here at Incirlik are new to us both, although they are somewhat similar to those at H4. Once airborne we are to maintain the runway heading at an altitude no higher than 1500 feet AGL, once 5 miles out from Incirlik we should contact Incirlik departure and follow their instructions until clear of Incirlik's controlled area - 30 miles from the base. It is important we do this as instructed as the Incirlik pattern will be busy and it will be dark. All Incirlik frequencies will be preset on the ground and recorded on my kneeboards. As we are departing Incirlik, Tank and Bug will be departing H4 and proceeding north.

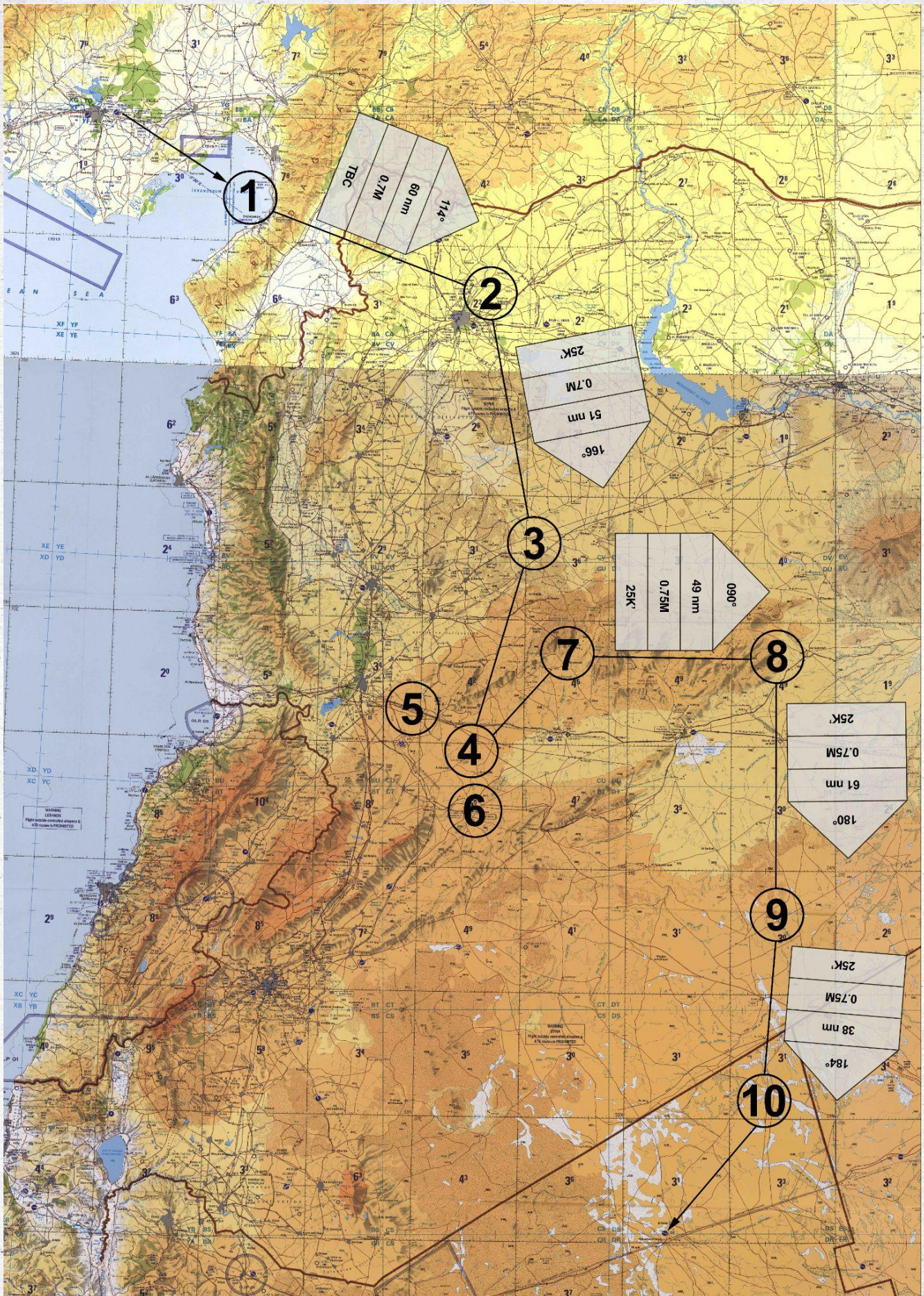
When me and Rotor have cleared Incirlik airspace we will check in with Sentinel, who will direct us to a safe altitude to ingress into Syria through the Gold Corridor - a corridor of airspace between Iskenderun in Turkey and Aleppo in Syria (WP1 - WP2). We should take care to follow these instructions carefully, this can also be crowded airspace.

Once clear of the Gold Corridor at waypoint 2 we will turn south for waypoint 3 and rendezvous with our assigned Tanker - Texaco. There will be multiple tankers operating in this tanker track so we should be careful to ensure we rendezvous with the correct one. Tank and Bug, operating as Sword 3 will also rendezvous at Texaco. They will tank, and once the strike package is ready and assembled they will push south into Sierra with the first wave of aircraft. As this is happening, me and Rotor will stay with the tanker, keeping our fuel topped off. Once Sword 3 are approaching Winchester or Bingo and are ready to depart they will begin to egress north to cycle to the tanker and my flight will depart the tanker and take their place on station to the south at waypoint 4, pushing to our mission frequency of Red 1 as we do.

Once on station our mission will be to gain the full attention of any Syrian SAMs threatening the rescue package. This means we will need to be switched on to new threats as they emerge, classifying them and prioritizing them as threats to the package. Should we establish a threat as a priority, then we will need to decide on how best to deal with it, this could be suppression with HARMS, destruction of the site or simply flying into the SAMs MEZ to ensure we become the target. Rapid use of the HTS pod to triangulate a SAMs position, establish its engagement zone and clarify the threat it poses will be essential. To aid in this, our waypoints have been set on key locations. Waypoint 4 will be the approximate extraction area, waypoint 5 will be the B-52 target area and waypoint 6 will be the Strike Eagle target area. We will remain on station until the rescue is completed, but if I am required to depart for any reason then Tank and Bug will return to Sierra to relieve us if they are able.

Once the mission is completed we will egress to the north, cycling back through the tanker if required, before following our flight plan back to H4.

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Loadout for this mission will be a mixed hunter/killer package for Rotor and me. Rotor will be carrying two HARMs for SAM suppression, I will be carrying 2 CBU-105s as well as a GBU-31. The 2,000 lb JDAM or 'crowd pleaser' as we sometimes call it, will give us maximum destruction of SAM sites and will also help with reducing asymmetric load. The crews at Incirlik have also rustled us up some NVGs, which will be replacing our helmet mounted sights on this mission. I will miss the helmet symbology for sure, but given that we will be tanking, flying in formation and engaging in combat at night then I think carrying the goggles will be a priority.

Bingo fuel for H4 from the AO is 4,000 lb, giving us around 8,000 lb after tanking to carry out our mission.

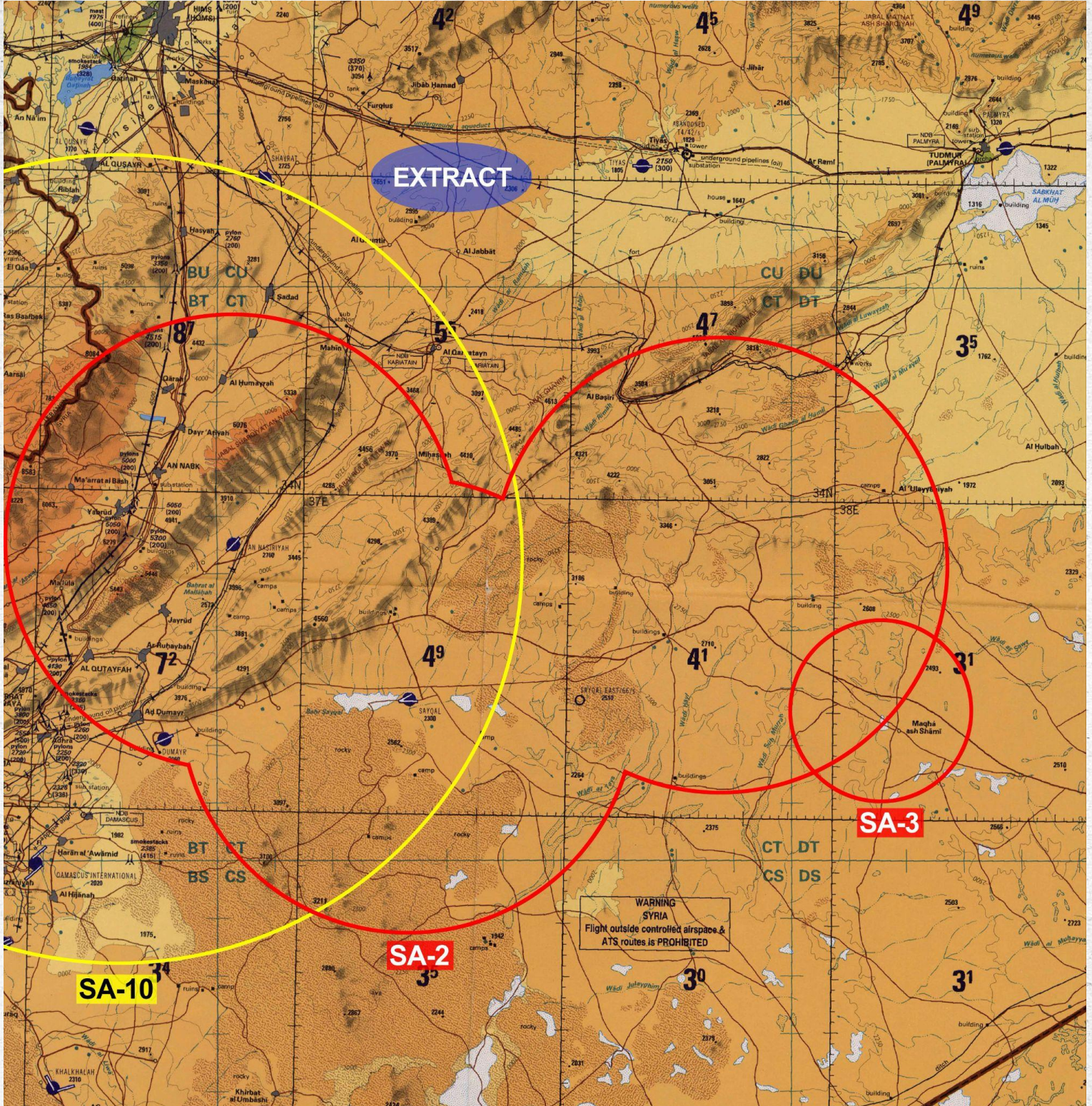
The bullseyes for this mission will be set at the extraction point (WP4).

There were a lot of unknowns when discussing threats. Fixed SAM sites should not be a major factor for us, as the SA-2s and SA-10s that cover the area north of Damascus are not in range of the extraction point. The Strike Eagle targets are just within the limits of these MEZs but with EW support they should be well protected.

The mobile SAM threat however is where the trouble lies, initial indications are of SA-6, SA-8 and SA-11 moving into the area, supported by Dogear radars. Vacuum will be on hand to give real time updates on SAM positions and we should be ready to react as needed. These systems, depending on their location, have the potential to drag us away from the jamming screen so we will need to be cautious when doing so.

There will also be AAA in our operating area, we have already seen this during our mission around Tiyas and Shayrat. Radar guided KS-19 batteries and smaller caliber S-60 and ZU-23 will be a threat throughout, there will be too many to realistically suppress them all so we should wait for guidance on what Archangel requires before attempting to do this.

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With the briefing concluded, we cut the transmission to our squadron mates at H4 and Rotor and I secluded ourselves away in the briefing room to study the mission details further. This mission will be a real test of our abilities, our first combat mission at night, in seriously hostile airspace, with an unclear threat picture. We'll need to have our wits about us on this one, the pilot on the ground is counting on us.

*** NOTES TO PLAYER ***

This mission will take place in two parts. Part 1 will end at the tanker, you will not be required to carry out air to air refueling. Part 2 will start the player behind the tanker, fully refueled and just before the player is required to push to the target area. Please note that any aircraft settings made in part 1 will not carry over to part 2. There will be a period of time in active pause at the start of part 2 to set the aircraft up as you desire.